

Non-executive Chairman's Report, 2013

In the past I have resisted the temptation to issue an annual report as I have regarded my job as mainly turning up and chairing meetings and making sure that the democratic process is functioning correctly in the ECF. This year things are slightly different in that (in the absence of a Chief Executive) I have been covering the duties of the Chief Executive and so (as I am also standing down as chairman) I will offer some valedictory thoughts.

What the ECF is for

The ECF fulfils several essential functions for chess at the national level. It exists in relation to chess in the same way as the Football exists in relation to football. It provides a framework of rules and regulation (including ECF Arbiters). It measures the performance of players through its grading system. It selects national representative teams and represents the views of English chess players to the wider world chess community. It organises some important chess tournaments such as the British Championships and organises the Counties Championships. All of these activities require (in my view) a national representative body

There are many independent organisations which organise chess events and leagues in England. In general the ECF tries to co-operate with these bodies (and many are affiliated to the ECF) but the ECF does not seek to control their activities. In the future, we are going to need a slightly different relationship between the independent organisations and the ECF to deal with the growing threat of computer cheating. I can see that in the future the ECF will need to ask organisers to "opt in" to a code of conduct for players in their events which ensures that this issue is dealt with in a uniform manner (and also to help organisers - who may lack the resources to deal with cases of suspected cheating).

How the ECF works (structurally)

The adoption of the new membership system has been (in my view) a great success and represents a significant step forward for the ECF. It brings the individual chess player much closer to the ECF with benefits for both. In my view the ECF Council does a reasonably effective job in holding the ECF Board to account and I would hesitate to move to One Member One Vote election of the Board because it would remove Council's ultimate source of power in the relationship it has with the Board. On the other hand mechanisms should be found to enable the individual member more say, perhaps by increasing the proportion of Council that is elected directly by individual members.

The Board remains committed to the Charitable Status project and progress has been slowed by the lack of manpower to push it forward. It is hoped that this will soon be resolved.

It is my personal opinion that the commercial part of the new ECF (hitherto called "Chess England") should be wholly owned and controlled by the charity. This is an arrangement used by many charities and would avoid possible conflict between the two new organisations. A better name would be "ECF Trading" and this body would receive all non subscription (and game fee?) income.

Is there an "ECF Malaise"?

I joined the BCF as a Direct Member in about 1995 after picking up a membership form at the Hastings tournament. When I went to my first County meeting a couple of years later I was surprised by the negative views expressed about the ECF and whatever it was doing at the time. I think it fair to say that there is a negative reaction to the ECF from a significant minority of the English chess playing community, and this has been a consistent feature of the chess scene. While it is very good to have vigorous arguments about policy matters I have noticed that many arguments have a strong personal element behind them. Thus before we suspended the complaints procedure introduced last year 6 complaints were received about two directors along the lines of "he was rude to me". Although I am a strong advocate of the use of courtesy by all involved with the ECF, using formal procedures to attempt to resolve personal differences is very time consuming and (ultimately) not very effective.

A characteristic of chess players is our strong liking for rules based systems. Much too often decisions rest on the letter of the law (the laws of chess or our internal competition rules) than a common sense view of what would be the best outcome for all concerned.

The existence of the English Chess Forum represents a challenge which I think the ECF finds it difficult to deal with. I read the Forum and I find it (usually) entertaining, (often) informative and (sometimes) correct (about ECF matters). Unfortunately it follows most of the internet in being a repository of wild rumours and a great deal of complaining and personal attacks. The obvious way for the ECF to communicate with its members is via the internet but the nature of the Forum probably suggests that a similar forum is not the way to go.

Thanks

The great strength of the ECF is that the great amount of work that volunteers put in as directors, managers and other officials. They deserve our thanks and (on the whole) we (as chess players) should be a lot kinder to them for their occasional lapses.

Mike Gunn, 11th October 2013.